

Sacrificial Sites, Place-Keeping, and 'Pre-History' in Wordsworth's 'Michael'

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The more closely we examine the 'sense of place' in Wordsworth, the more tenuous become the connections between him and the 'place' we wish to make for him in history. Regarding the relationship between the poet and the nascent sciences of historical reconstruction of his day, this means specifically his place in the history of history-making at the end of the eighteenth century. This essay is about 'Michael' as a poem of historical succession, sacrifice, and 'place-keeping,' and about 'place-keeping' as a function of that numerical anomaly, zero.

Of central importance to 'Michael,' of course, is the 'straggling heap of unhewn stones' to which, the poet tells us, 'a story appertains' (17–18).¹ At some point between 1793, the year of his first encounter with Stonehenge, and 1800, the publication date of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth became very interested in stones, which seem to litter the *Ballads* like glacial erratics. The stones in the mossy 'seat' in a yew tree, where the poet leaves his 'Lines'; the 'old gray stone' on which the poet sits in 'Expostulation and Reply'; the three, uninscribed 'rough hewn stone' pillars of 'Hart-Leap Well'; stones rolling in 'diurnal round' with rocks and trees and human remains; a 'narrow girdle of rough stones and crags' and, finishing off the second and last volume of *Lyrical Ballads* itself, the pile of stones comprising a half-begun sheepfold.

Oddly enough, for a poet who was later to become famous among deconstructionists for his 'Essay on Epitaphs,' there is only one explicit reference to a gravestone—Adam Bruce's in 'Ellen Irwin, or the Braes of Kirtle'—and only one epitaph—'A Poet's Epitaph,' as the poem is entitled—in all of *Lyrical Ballads*. There are graves, of course, and grave-like mounds of earth: the supposed infant's grave of 'The Thorn,' the unidentified graves of Leonard Ewbank's family in 'The Brothers,' and the 'green' graves that may be 'seen' near the little maid's cottage in 'We are Seven,' whose grave-stones, if they exist, go entirely unremarked. Roughly contemporary with the writing

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of the *Ballads*, there are the earliest versions of *The Prelude*, with its 'long green ridge of turf ... Whose shape was like a grave' ('First Part,' 312–313), at the foot of the gibbet beneath Penrith Beacon. David Collings has suggested that, given Michael's declaration that he could not 'lie quiet in [his] grave' if his lands were to 'pass into a Stranger's hand' (241–242), the remains of the sheepfold itself can be read as a sort of 'unfinished tombstone' (176) haunted by the restless spirit of its former patriarch.

Much has been written, and contested, concerning Wordsworth, history, and the historical imagination, but here I wish to speak about Wordsworth as our first poet of the *pre-historical* imagination, our first *archaeological* poet. By 'pre-historical' I mean not just the history of what pre-dates historical records, but that moment in the act of historicizing that precedes narrative, that moment when the sheer presence of the physical world, like 'the pastoral Mountains' of 'Michael' confronting, 'face to face,' the traveler who leaves 'the public way,' is taken to be a problem for narrative intelligibility, rather than an extension of it. No poet before Wordsworth, whatever his or her melancholy obsession with pillaged abbeys or Roman ruins, had ever singled out for attention that liminal moment when the world of inorganic 'things' looms up in the shape of what Bill Brown, in a recent issue of *Critical Inquiry*, calls 'the entifiable that is unspecified,' an 'illegible remainder' ordinarily 'retroprojected' in the subject's everyday encounter with a world of intelligible objects. In Wordsworth, the moment when that unremarkable, everyday 'retroprojection' is first remarked, in all its strangeness, seems to occur simultaneously with the recession of objects from the second-order grid of historical as distinct from the first-order grid of measureable or enumerative intelligibility.

As Hayden White and later postmodern historians like F. R. Ankersmitt and Ian Hodder have taught us, our sense of the past as intelligible always takes a narrative form: legend, myth, chronicle, or tale—what I have called elsewhere 'testimony.' That there is a poetics of history, then, seems indisputable. But is there also a poetics of pre-history, and if so, what is its relation to the poetics of history, and of historical 'testimony'? More specifically for our purposes, what is the relation of a poetics of pre-history to enumeration and measurement? Do they, too, have a poetics, or even a proto-narratology?

Recurring testimonial breakdown and reconstruction was crucial to the emergence of modern secular history in the course of the eighteenth century. During that period in the West's transition from sacred to secular explanations of the past, the accelerating pace of these reiterated crises of testimony, and especially Biblical testimony, created a change in people's understanding of the relative priority and weight to be given to material evidence, to what we might call the physical 'clues' of history, as opposed to the 'testimony' enlisted to explain those clues. By the end of the romantic period, this crucial shift in evidentiary priority was all but complete: the unimpeachable authority of the Bible, whose chronology of creation had informed the 'cosmogonies' of earlier 'theorists of the earth' like Thomas Burnet, William Whiston, and John Woodward, was rapidly giving way to the new authority of material 'clues,' such as stratigraphical evidence of multiple deluges and serial extinctions apparently defying the Biblical timeline. In the process, geology and paleontology were beginning to emerge as discrete

reconstructive sciences, respectively, of the secular prehistory of the earth and of the animals and plants living upon it. In short, the rise of an Enlightened, universal secular history cannot be separated from the West's growing intimations of its own prehistory.

Archaeology, the reconstructive science of human prehistory, though coined as a term early in the process of secularization, took longer to emerge from the shadows of Genesis. This was true in England, at any rate. As Bruce Trigger observes, most English antiquarians, even the most advanced, continued to believe well past the end of the eighteenth century that the world had been created approximately 6000 years before, as Bishop James Ussher had calculated from scriptural genealogies, and that the surviving written records, pagan as well as biblical, were roughly accurate back to the Creation. As a result, says Trigger, it was assumed 'that artifacts and monuments merely illustrated the historically recorded accomplishments of the past' (72). Wordsworth was our first poet-philosopher of a newly emerging archaeological forensics in which artifacts were to assume a critical, and not just an illustrative, function.

Alan Bewell has described Wordsworth's attitude toward his neighbors at Grasmere as similar to that of Malinowski among the Trobriand islanders (34). The same analogy can be drawn between the poet's attitude toward the material remains of Devon and Westmorland and that of the modern archaeologist, particularly with regard to measurement and enumeration. Peter Manning has noted correspondences between certain themes in Wordsworth's later poetry and the emerging discipline of archaeology (286–287). But even as early as the *Lyrical Ballads* we discover a distinctly modern, archaeological frame of mind with respect to those material clues of human activity—usually stones or other landscape features—that appear, initially, at the margin of narrative, and specifically oral narrative—at the point, that is, where testimony falters, or is in the process of construction or reconstruction. This, for Wordsworth, seems to include, or overlap with, the realm of number.

Before story, before history, before the 'gentle reader,' with 'such stores as silent thought can bring,' can 'find/A tale in *every thing*,' there is the sheer enumeration of 'things' in the world to traverse: 'three score and ten,' 'eighty,' 'not twenty paces from the door'; 'one summer day'; 'a single blow'. Is there, in fact, any collection of poems in any language conveying as many acts of enumeration and quantification as *Lyrical Ballads*? 'A boy of five years old,' 'one morn,' 'five times did I say,' 'a little cottage girl ... eight years old,' 'seven in all,' 'seven are we,' 'two of us in the church-yard lie,' 'twelve steps or more from my mother's door,' 'you are five,' 'we are seven.' At this point we've traversed only the length of the two poems immediately following 'Simon Lee,' 'Anecdote for Fathers' and 'We are Seven.' Yet to come are 'Not five yards from the mountain path,' 'three yards beyond,' 'three feet long, and two feet wide,' 'five years ... five summers ... five long winters' and 'three several pillars, each a rough hewn stone'—and even then we have only gotten as far as the first poem in the second volume, 'Hart-Leap Well.'

Explicit connections between the pre-1800 Wordsworth and the nascent archaeological sciences of his day are about as rare as those that, according to John Wyatt, obtain between the poet and early geology. The most we can usually do when trying to link the

poet of the Great Decade to developments in any of the so-called 'historical sciences' is to look for internal evidence of the poet's familiarity with concepts, approaches, or questions germane to these sciences. Marjorie Nicolson, Paul Sheats, Theresa Kelley, Peter Manning, and Alan Bewell have done very fine work, on stones and shells and early conceptions of geological or evolutionary processes in Wordsworth's poetic development. There is much still to be done on his relation to the emerging concept of a distinctly human pre-history, and even more specifically, on the relation of number to pre-history in Wordsworth's early poetry.

However, we can make some inferences. A. L. Owen was among the first to observe that Wordsworth apparently knew the work of the early eighteenth-century archaeologist of Stonehenge, William Stukeley, who believed the Druids built the stone circle as a temple of worship for their Abrahamic, proto-Christian religion. For Stukeley, the ground plans of Stonehenge and Avebury were 'hieroglyphic' inscriptions on the landscape representing the three persons of the Holy Trinity. While there is no evidence as to when Wordsworth may have first read Stukeley, we know from poems like 'Salisbury Plain' that he was fascinated by Druid lore, and in the 1805 version of the *Prelude*, he even characterized himself, during his studies at Cambridge (Stukeley's *alma mater*) as a youthful initiate into the Druid class of Bards (Owen 163).

As Trigger and Alain Schnapp point out, modern archaeology is indebted to Stukeley not for his Druidical conclusions, but for his innovative methods, especially his precise stratigraphical and site measurements—height and depth, length and width, thickness and weight, distance and orientation. What should interest us about Stukeley's possible influence on the Wordsworth of 1793 to 1800 is this attention to enumeration and measurement, locations and positions, not only with regard to the architecture of Stonehenge, but with respect to the disposition and stratification of the numerous graves or 'barrows' appearing on the plain surrounding it, many of which Stukeley excavated with his own hands. Here are excerpts from his findings at several sites, as recorded in *Stonehenge, a Temple Restor'd to the British Druids*: 'About three foot below the surface, a layer of flints ... about a foot thick, rested on a layer of soft mould another foot: in which was inclos'd an urn full of bones ...' (44); 'We made a cross-section ten foot each way, three foot broad over its center ...' (45); 'At length we found a squarish hole It was three foot and a half, i.e., two cubits long, and near two foot broad, ... a cubit and a half deep from the surface' (45–46). Regarding 'one of the small barrows, 20 cubits in diameter,' Stukeley writes: 'A child's body (as it seems) had been burnt here, and cover'd up in that hole: but thro' the length of time[,] consum'd.' (45).

Elsewhere, ('Wordsworth', Relics') I have traced the possible connection between Stukeley's care with enumeration and measurement and the similar care Wordsworth evinces in 'The Thorn,' a poem about what may or may not turn out to be an 'infant's grave,' and in 'The Brothers,' which records Leonard's confusion as to whether or not 'another grave' has been added to those of the family plot among the unmarked barrows of his ancestral village. Here I would like to ask what, if anything, Stukeley's pre-historic child's body, 'burnt ... and cover'd up in that hole' near a circle of stones which was at that time considered an ancient site of Druidical human sacrifices might have to do with another circle of stones in a 'hidden' landscape, an enclosed empty

space that never gets built, but is left 'a straggling heap of unhewn stones' far from 'the public way' of what we might conceive of as universal, recorded, enumerated history.

Parker, underscoring the sacrificial logic of 'Michael' as a poem about poetic succession, with Michael himself in the role of patriarchal poet, cites Wordsworth's appended observation that the sheepfold Michael conceives as a 'covenant' between himself and Luke, the son on whom he has set his hopes of ancestral salvation, 'enable[s] the shepherds,' as Wordsworth's ambiguously remarks, 'conveniently to single out one or more of [the sheep] for any particular purpose' (Butler and Green 701). Writes Parker, 'Transgressing the utilitarian function of the note is a drama of culling, a shadowy agenda of separation and, perhaps, sacrifice' (61). 'Michael' reverses the progressive sacrificial logic of the Abraham and Isaac story by substituting a son for a sheep rather than a ram for a son. What we might call 'pre-numeration' plays a role in this implicit process of sacrifice and substitution.

Let us begin with the heap of stones itself, and the directions the poet gives to his readers, especially those 'youthful Poets, who among these Hills/ Will be [his] second self when [he] is gone' (38–39).

If from the public way you turn your steps
Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head gill,
You will suppose that with an upright path
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent
The pastoral Mountains front you, face to face.
But, courage! for beside that boisterous Brook
The mountains have all open'd out themselves,
And made a hidden valley of their own. (1–8)

There is a hint here of what Michael Simpson, in a recent article in *The Wordsworth Circle*, calls (somewhat misleadingly, I think) 'parallax.' It is something that anyone traveling on foot from the center of Grasmere toward Green-head Gill these days can experience for him or herself, and it is an occurrence very common in Wordsworth's poetry. We find it prominently displayed, for instance, in 'Strange Fits of Passion' and the boat-stealing scene of *The Prelude*, a strange impression of motion among the inanimate objects one perceives that is the result, in fact, of misrecognizing in them the projected effects of one's own movement. Looking at the mountains near Grasmere, suggests the narrator of 'Michael,' one would think they form an uninterrupted green wall, but as one nears them, they seem to have 'open'd out themselves.' Gradual change in perspective arising from the traveler's progress here gets interpreted as movement among the 'pastoral Mountains' confronting him or her so as to reveal 'a hidden valley of their own.'

Note, first of all, that this optical illusion depends on the traveler's suspension of his or her ordinary sense of moving deliberately through space and time, and by extension, of even having a place, or a moment, in space and time from which or toward which to move. The traveler's uncanny experience of displacement leads to the perception of a gap, a break, in the otherwise unbroken surface of material reality that 'front[s]' him or her in turning aside to 'face' it directly, and this choice to confront the world directly is itself the result of a deliberate decision to interrupt, to create a gap in, one's journey

along 'the public way'—that is, along one's route through a world necessarily shared with others, as a body moving, spatially and temporally, among other moving bodies. In exchange for the intersubjective world of waking, historical reality, the reader has substituted the solipsistic, 'pre'-historical world of waking dream.²

In the gap that the mountains seem to open up 'themselves' appears 'a straggling heap of unhewn stones' to which 'a story appertains.' This is a story we are not invited to 'find' or 'make' for ourselves, as in 'Simon Lee.' Instead, the poet will 'relate' it 'For the delight of a few natural hearts' (35–36). We are in the presence, in short, of a Wordsworthian 'spot of time'—a geographical spot whose story, about to be uttered, yet lies dormant in a heap that was intended to take a hieroglyphic shape, like Stukeley's reconstructions of Stonehenge and Avebury: the shape of empty enclosure, of 'place-keeping,' not a letter or a picture, but a numeral, zero.

Dorothy's journal tells us that the original of Michael's intended sheepfold was shaped like a heart, an apt symbol, as Stuart Peterfreund (192–193) has observed, of the anticipated bond—both affectional and covenantal—between the old shepherd and his son. But nothing in the poem itself hints at the sheepfold's specific intended shape. Michael calls the one stone that Luke lays before his departure for the big city a 'corner-stone' (414), but that seems to be meant in a foundational, not necessarily a polygonal sense. What we do know is that the sheepfold was meant to be an enclosure, the simplest form of which is a circle, an 'O'.

Wordsworth's obsession with stones and numbers in *Lyrical Ballads* reappears in the following few years. In the poet's well-known account of his dream of the Arab on a dromedary fleeing an apocalyptic deluge in Book V of *The Prelude*, the *Elements* of Euclid that the rider seeks to preserve from destruction is represented by a stone. It is from the Latin for stone that we derive the word 'calculation,' as well as Newton's and Leibnitz's 'calculus,' and pebbles comprised the earliest instruments of calculation in the ancient history of mathematics (Kaplan 20–24). But in 'Michael' Wordsworth says specifically that what we will find in this 'hidden spot' among the mountains is a 'heap of stones,' and the management of 'heaps' of objects, says mathematical historian Robert Kaplan, is what eventually led to the creation of number systems based on 'places' for the enumeration of congruent groups of objects. In our decimal system, for instance, the 'place' to the left of the units place beside the decimal point represents quantities, or 'heaps,' of ten, the next after that, hundreds, and so on. The numeral 'zero' arose specifically as a way to 'keep' open, in the series of numerals comprising large numbers, a 'place' where there were no quantities to be enumerated. In '101,' for instance, the numeral '0' indicates that there are no groups—or 'heaps'—of tens in the tens 'place' where they would otherwise be tallied—or 'told.'

In 'Michael,' however, the 'heap' of 'unhewn stones' is of an indeterminate number, and thus, the 'place' it fills, and the tally that is to be 'told' there, must remain indeterminate as well, unstable, ever on the verge of disappearing altogether. The 'pastoral Mountains' that seem to have 'opened up' a place 'themselves'—and to have kept it open—at the approach of the traveler dis-placed from enumerated history will close up in an instant, vanishing like Brigadoon, as he or she retreats again to the 'public' way. Unlike every other ruin or relic of human construction in *Lyrical*

Ballads, Michael's sheepfold has never achieved a determinate form: Luke lays its 'cornerstone,' and until Michael receives news of Luke's disgraceful ruination in the big city, he too, 'when he could find a leisure hour ... to that valley took his way, and there/Wrought at the Sheep-fold' (449–452). But the structure is left unfinished when Michael dies, and amounts to only a shapeless pile at the moment the poet directs us thitherward. Its very stones, 'unhewn,' are as difficult to identify with the work of a human hand as the lithic *objet trouve* that might once have served an extinct nomad as axe or arrowhead.

The Sheepfold, then, has never even achieved the status of a cultural artifact. It occupies the nearest thing to a pre-historical 'ground zero' of discernable human activity that we are likely to find anywhere in Wordsworth's poetry, or in the work of any other poet, for that matter.

We can be pretty sure that Wordsworth knew something of geometry from as early as his years at Hawkshead. Zero, however, arrived in the West not with Euclid but much later, with double-entry bookkeeping. It was borrowed, along with Arabic numerals and algebra, from the medieval Arab mathematicians who, like the Bedouin of Wordsworth's dream, did in fact save Euclid's *Elements* from destruction, along with many other seminal texts of the ancient world, by translating them into Arabic, from which Western mathematicians later re-translated them into Latin. Among those who have written about Wordsworth and mathematics, I have benefited especially from the work of Marilyn Gaull and Joan Baum, and W. W. Rouse Ball has provided useful information on the teaching of mathematics at Cambridge. No one as far as I know has attempted to trace the specific influence of algebra and arithmetic on Wordsworth's early life and work. The poet's math tutor at St John's College, Cambridge, after all, was James Wood, a noted algebraist famous for his textbooks on the subject, and in the months that Wordsworth spent in Revolutionary France he may well have met or have been in contact with historians of mathematics such as Jean-Etienne Montucla, to whom the transmission histories of algebra and geometry were much better known than to mathematicians in England (Dauben and Scriba 9–11).

Wordsworth's Arab dream about Euclid's *Elements* is but one of several places in his work indicating the consolations of reason that he found in geometry, and his apocalyptic anxieties concerning the destructive effects of historical catastrophe on his own poetic legacy. But Euclid's geometry, like ancient Greek mathematics in general, is not largely concerned with quantification or enumeration. In the eyes of the Greek mathematicians of the fifth century and the Alexandrian period, calculation was for merchants and traders, not for philosophers. Thus, writes Kaplan, they overlooked the 'zero,' something that Wordsworth, the philosopher poet, punningly suggests that 'youthful poets' should pay attention to: 'It is in truth an utter solitude,' he says of this desolate valley, 'Nor should I have made mention of this Dell/But for one object which you might pass by,/Might see and notice not' (13–16). Thus is the 'youthful poet' enjoined to 'notice' in the unrecognizable 'object' he sees the incomplete 'naught,' the tentative 'place-keeper,' that keeps open a place for him, a refuge from the public world of what Wordsworth calls, in 'The world is too much with us,' 'Getting and spending.'

Leaving his route along the 'public way' of enumerated history and commercially remunerated poetic labor, in a time and space he can tally and 'tell' for himself, the youthful poet is invited to jump down the rabbit-hole, the 'naught,' of Wordsworth's story. His sacrifice there will, perhaps, save him from the snares of literary commerce in the 'dissolute city' ('Michael,' 444), while at the same time canceling an ancestral debt initially incurred by the patriarchal poet himself. In being a kind father to Luke, says Michael

I but repay a gift which I myself
 receiv'd at others hands, for ... I still
 Remember them who lov'd me in my youth:
 Both of them sleep together: here they liv'd
 As all their Forefathers had done, and when
 At length their time was come, they were not loth
 To give their bodies to the family mold.
 I wish'd that thou should'st live the life they liv'd. (373–381)

What kind of life was that? Michael is sending Luke to the city, to the world of getting and spending, of 'calculation,' to make money enough to release the ancestral lands from debt. But Michael himself inherited, from the parents he professes to love, 'fields ... burthen'd' with a nearly identical debt: 'Till I was forty years of age, not more/Than half of my inheritance was mine,' he tells his son. And despite all his toil, things stand now where they stood then: 'but little less/than half his substance,' we read, stands forfeit as surety for the failed bond of Michael's nephew. 'Tis a long time to look back, my Son,' says the old man, 'And see so little gain from sixty years'—or to be more precise, zero gain.

In her introduction to a recent issue of *The Wordsworth Circle* devoted to a conference at Lancaster University on Wordsworth's poetic legacy, Sally Bushell writes:

The poet justifies telling this tale to 'delight' his contemporaries and to inspire the 'youthful poets' who will come after him. Yet the imagined future ghosts of his own past self seem to be held in a dubious half-life, their own identities submerged and appropriated by their predecessor before they have even been formed. (2)

For the youthful poet, then, remaining 'among these hills' and being saved from the world of poetic commerce means becoming a Wordsworthian *homerid*, the poet's faithful singer, and his *homeros*, his hostage, his sacrificial substitute. It is to play the role of Luke laying the cornerstone for the poet's Michael, of Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. It is to construe/construct from this heap of stones the ground zero—and thus to keep 'open' the 'place'—of his own immolation. Finally, it is to be, like Stukeley's child, 'burnt here, and cover'd up in that hole... ' 'From three foot deep,' adds Stukeley, 'we found much wood ashes soft and black as ink ... ' (45).

Notes

- [1] Unless otherwise indicated, all references to poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* come from the edition of R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones.
- [2] I examine this process in general and at greater length in *The Self as Mind*.

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